The Glue That Binds: Linking Monitoring Through Communication in the Great Lakes Basin

Ric Lawson

Great Lakes Commission, 400 Fourth St., Ann Arbor, MI 48103, USA

Biographical Sketch of Author

Ric Lawson is a project manager with the Great Lakes Commission. He has been with the Commission for three years, working on environmental monitoring coordination and watershed management in the Great Lakes basin. His work includes developing monitoring databases and information management systems, forming and facilitating regional coordination bodies, and providing training and support to public representative groups. Lawson is executive secretary of the Lake Michigan Monitoring Coordination Council and the Great Lakes Coastal Wetlands Consortium. He is currently working on the design of a monitoring program inventory for the entire Great Lakes basin.

Abstract

One of the major challenges in natural resource management is coordinating the collection, evaluation and communication of critical ecological, economic and social information. Among the difficulties are that the data involved are collected by a diverse mix of agencies and organizations, and that the financial resources dedicated to long-term monitoring are often limited. The Great Lakes Commission is involved in numerous efforts to coordinate monitoring in Great Lakes basin and to consolidate and disseminate critical information. The key to success in this work lies in establishing successful communication networks. These efforts include multijurisdictional coordination bodies, online monitoring and data inventories, clearinghouses and online mapping, GIS standardization, and indicator development.

This paper focuses on the organization and communication of monitoring efforts within coordination bodies. These include monitoring efforts based on geography (Lake Michigan basin) and resources (wetlands). Generally, successful participation in coordination efforts depends upon the availability of resources and a group commitment to a collective mission. There must be something to gain for each member, and there must be a simple and convenient means to exchange information and ideas. The coordination work is carried out through subgroups that focus on particular elements of the mission. These subgroups are coordinated through several information-exchange mechanisms to make the best use of time during a small number of meetings and conference calls. Online inventories and other collections of data provide useful tools for assembling critical information and facilitate connections among sets of data. Examples of such collections include data from Lake Michigan monitoring programs, Great Lakes air toxic releases, Great Lakes basin graphic information systems (GIS) and Great Lakes hydrological and meteorological records. Indicators are being developed through several processes including the State of the Lakes Ecosystem Conference (SOLEC), Lakewide Management Plans (LaMPs), and the cooperative efforts of a coastal wetlands consortium. These approaches each address a different aspect of the data collection and communication problem and provide solutions to the need for regional data collection and use.